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PP RUEHAG
DE RUEHCV #1768/01 1661625
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 151625Z JUN 06
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5074
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6647
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5561
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 2105
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0350
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1290
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3838
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0755
RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 2189
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 1001
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0292
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0793
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001768

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COPENHAGEN FOR DLAWTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/14/2031
TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM SCUL VE
SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM UPDATE

REF: A. CARACAS 1544

¶B. CARACAS 717
¶C. CARACAS 536
¶D. CARACAS 191

CARACAS 00001768 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) This cable is the second in a continuing series of updates detailing the accelerating repression of freedom of expression by the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV). As indicated in reftels, the BRV employs a variety of mechanisms - legal, economic, regulatory, judicial, and rhetorical - to harass the private media, engendering a repressive, almost fascistic, attitude toward the free press. Topics in this update include:

--Valencia radio station 810 AM faces forced closure by the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL)
--Tabloid TalCual next to face BRV wrath
--Update on Bolivar state confrontation with opposition newspaper Correo del Caroni
--Economic pressure...for now
--President Chavez announced June 14 a plan to review all radio and television licenses
--President Chavez hints at control of internet

END SUMMARY

ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST

¶2. (U) Press accounts reported on June 8 that the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) forced the removal of Valencia radio station "810 AM's" transmitter from public lands. The measure was immediately criticized as a politically-motivated move against a media outlet openly critical of the Chavez administration. Similar to the case involving Correo del Caroni (reftel A) in Bolivar state, the ostensible justification for the closure concerns ownership and zoning of the real estate where the medium is located. One journalist, Manuel Felipe Sierra, derided the supposed land claim, stating that the government is trying to "liquidate" all media outlets that criticize the President, or "Bolivarian" mayors and governors. CONATEL ordered the radio station to relocate within a period of 45 days; citing insufficient resources and time to do so, the radio station closed down.

STAY AWAY FROM MY DAUGHTER

¶3. (U) The tabloid TalCual and humor columnist Laureano Marquez face further sanctions stemming from the alleged slander of President Chavez's daughter, Rosines Chavez. In November 2005, the paper published Marquez's weekly humor column, titled "Dear Rosines," a satirical take on the child's supposed role in suggesting changes to the national shield. Shortly thereafter, the BRV's National Council for Children and Adolescents initiated legal proceedings against the paper, the editor, and the columnist, citing a violation of the rights to honor, reputation, image, private life and intimacy of Chavez's daughter. A lawyer for the paper decried the legal maneuverings as an attempt to censure the paper and a blatant attack on the freedom of press. Already ordered never to use Chavez's daughter's name again, TalCual's conciliatory gesture of removing the column from

CARACAS 00001768 002.2 OF 003

the paper's web site was determined insufficient, and the legal battle continues. The state is seeking a fine equal to 20 months' revenue. This drastic measure, if applied, would likely bankrupt the paper. (Note: TalCual's director is opposition presidential candidate Teodoro Petkoff.)

THE STATE OF THE UNION

¶4. (C) Post reported in reftel A on the confrontation between Correo del Caroni, an opposition newspaper in Bolivar state, and the state legislative council controlled by the ruling Fifth Republic Movement (MVR). State legislative councilmember Alexis Romero provided Poloff more details about this situation on June 7. Romero, who could be characterized as a disgruntled chavista, indicated that the governor wanted the paper shut down, and directed the council find a way to do it. Romero does not believe Chavez or the federal government exerted any pressure for the paper to be targeted, but rather that the paper was simply a thorn in the governor's side. He stated that the newspaper's sharpest criticisms really have been aimed at state issues, not Chavez and the federal government. In fact, Romero added, the federal government ordered the state to postpone the closure of the newspaper and to put the demolition on hold until after the presidential elections in December.

¶5. (C) David Natera, owner and editor of Correo del Caroni, confirmed many of Romero's statements to Emboffs on June 13. Natera indicated that he believes the state government is using scare tactics to get him to close down. In fact, he showed us a local newspaper article from March in which his kidnapping was predicted. Natera stated he is worried for his safety and that of his family, but he "will not back down." Natera said the governor tried to bankrupt the paper by withholding government advertisements and scaring the private sector to do the same; failing that, he resorted to

having the legislature call for demolition of the building. Natera told Emboffs that the order has not yet been sent from the legislature to the municipality, but he fears it will come soon.

THE POWER OF THE PURSE

16. (C) Many observers are predicting more dramatic BRV steps against independent media after the December presidential elections. Gloria Cuenca of the communications faculty at the Central University of Venezuela told Emboffs on May 23 that the government continues to squeeze the media, but in a slow, methodical manner. For now, the BRV is concentrating on economic pressure. Cuenca indicated she believes this somewhat "softer" method of attacking press freedoms will last only through the elections; after the elections, the BRV may take the gloves off.

TV AND RADIO CONCESSIONS THREATENED

17. (U) President Chavez turned up the heat on June 14 when he announced he had directed a review of all radio and television licenses. Taking advantage of a national audience at a ceremony highlighting the arrival of AK-103 rifles, Chavez indicated he had taken this measure because many outlets hide behind "freedom of expression" in an effort to divide the country. Not taking such an action, he said, would be irresponsible. Chavez acknowledged that some channels had taken some positive steps since the April 2002 crisis, while others have continued their destabilizing behavior. Chavez insinuated U.S. financing of media

CARACAS 00001768 003.2 OF 003

campaigns to divide his country. He did not, however, provide a timeline for this review, but noted that many licenses expire in 2007.

WORLD WIDE WEB? NOT IN VENEZUELA

18. (U) Chavez opened a new front in his war against freedom of expression at the OASGA. In a draft resolution on freedom of expression, the BRV proposed language that said the Internet was a "valuable contribution," but "lamented" that it could be used to promote "negative stereotypes of individuals and vulnerable groups," hinting that the medium ought to be controlled. Interestingly, the same resolution included language calling for the "democratization of ownership of the media."

COMMENT

19. (C) In recent weeks, President Chavez has been continuing the tactic of directing pressure against media outlets. Perhaps the most troublesome development is the new threat to "review" TV and radio licenses. Opposition TV networks are the most outspoken and effective sources of anti-government information.

WHITAKER